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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 000462

SIPDIS

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STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV, S/P, AND DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [VM](#) [ETMIN](#) [HUMANR](#) [RELFREE](#)
SUBJECT: S/P OFFICER MEETS WITH PROTESTANT LEADERS

Reftels: A) HCMC 191, B) 04 Hanoi 3257, C) Hanoi 395, D) 04 Hanoi 1987, E) Hanoi 353

1. (SBU) Summary: Evangelical Church of Vietnam: North (ECVN) pastors have begun to engage provincial authorities about renovating and rebuilding churches. The Church is also looking into registering some sub-chapters and opening a bible school. In the future, the ECVN plans to increase outreach to Protestants in the Northwest Highlands and will include provincial authorities in these efforts. Problems for Protestants in the Northwest Highlands have decreased recently. The ECVN welcomes the new Instruction on Protestants, but believes the long-awaited implementing decrees of the Ordinance on Religion are more significant. In the absence of these decrees, some local authorities continue to enforce previous, more restrictive legal standards. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Visiting S/P Officer William Inboden continued his consultations with Vietnamese Protestants (started in Ho Chi Minh City - Ref. A) with meetings with two pastors of the ECVN. On February 23, Inboden met with Pastor Nguyen Gia Huan of the Haiphong branch of the ECVN, together with members of his church board, and on February 24, he spoke with Pastor Au Quang Vinh of the Hanoi church. Both Huan and Vinh also sit on the new leadership board of the ECVN (Ref. B).

3. (SBU) Pastor Huan detailed the agenda of the ECVN in the wake of its first congress in 20 years and the formal acceptance of its new charter and leadership board by the GVN, which came at the beginning of February (Ref. C). The Church has just sent members of its board to Thanh Hoa Province to seek permission to renovate the church there. Members had also gone to Nghe An Province to request land for a new church building. The ECVN church there was destroyed by authorities several years ago. Pastor Vinh informed Inboden that Nghe An provincial leaders had refused to meet the board members. The ECVN will now seek to make progress in other areas and focus on Nghe An again later. In the future, the ECVN will also be seeking to get recognition for five "sub-chapters" of current churches, some of which currently lack pastors or church buildings and which also are not financially independent. The Church's new charter allows such sub-chapters, but recognition may take some time due to a lack of trained pastors and financial pressures. Authorities have shown "flexibility" in dealing with these sub-chapters so far, said Huan.

4. (SBU) Both Pastors explained that the Ordinance on Religion, issued last June, has allowed some improvements for the Church (Ref. D). For example, the ECVN held a conference for Protestant women in Haiphong in February. The Church only informed authorities of the meeting and did not ask their permission, as is allowed under the new Ordinance. The ability to open a new Bible school, also permitted in the Ordinance, is very important to the ECVN. It has just begun the process of applying to open a school in Hanoi this summer and plans to enroll 50 students on a three-year course. However, some provincial authorities have indicated they are still waiting for the release of implementing decrees for the Ordinance on Religion issued last July, which in legal terms is a more significant document. In the absence of the implementing decrees, some authorities have continued to enforce previous, more restrictive regulations. Pastor Vinh also feared that without the implementing decrees, some local authorities would begin to make their own interpretations of the Ordinance. The ECVN has distributed many copies of the Ordinance to believers, including in the Northwest Highlands.

5. (SBU) Both Vinh and Huan welcomed the Prime Minister's new Instruction on Protestants (Ref. E). Since the Instruction was released, the Haiphong church has had no problems from authorities, Pastor Huan declared. If authorities follow the Instruction closely it will be positive for Protestant believers. Some authorities have not yet seen the Instruction. The most significant aspect to the Instruction is the acceptance of house churches that operate in a "routine manner," Huan said. The ECVN has sent copies of the Instruction to all pastors, and the document

was read aloud in church services so that people would be aware of their rights.

16. (SBU) Referring to the unregistered ethnic-Hmong Protestants in the Northwest Highlands, Pastor Huan explained that dealing with their situation is a "big job." As of October, the ECVN has recorded 930 ethnic minority Protestant groups meeting in the region and hopes to begin registering them as new sub-chapters. Pastor Vinh said that the new Instruction recognizes the existence of Protestants in the Northwest Highlands, something that provincial officials had until now denied. The ECVN will send delegations to visit believers in the region and will inform Provincial officials of these efforts and ask their support. The ECVN hopes to send more Bibles to the region and to teach more ethnic minority church volunteers in order to end "errant practices" by some Hmong Protestants. The EVCN still receives reports from believers of "problems" in the Northwest Highlands, but they are fewer in number and "are not as serious as in the past," Huan said. Huan added that he does not expect that the authorities will ever allow all the groups of ethnic minority Protestants to form official congregations.

17. (SBU) Looking to the future, Pastor Huan said he hopes the GVN will issue further guidance to authorities about how to recognize new churches. This could be a standardized form or a time requirement after which authorities would have to approve or deny a request for recognition. Pastor Vinh said that he thought the GVN had taken USG pressure into account in making its many recent positive changes. He hoped the USG would not place any sanctions on Vietnam, saying these our only hurt "regular citizens."

18. (U) In the interest of expediency, S/P William Inboden asked post to send this cable without his clearance.
MARINE